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AUTHOR	Tolan, Patrick H.
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ABSTRACT

This brief presents an overview of a comprehensive school safety plan that combines calm and sound attention to the violence that currently pervades children's lives. With regard to the absolute probability of encountering violence or being victimized by crime, schools are the social setting in which students are most protected and least likely to be harmed. However, the surety of school safety varies by community, and if the definition of school safety is expanded to include traveling to and from school and time spent with acquaintances after school, the insulation from harm is lessened considerably. Identifying youth who are likely to be violent is best undertaken early in the elementary grades. In most cases, the school can play a key role in developing within-school behavior management strategies and connecting these strategies with those that can be used at home. Special strategies for inner-city schools may be needed to counter the belief that aggression is a necessary response to frustration. A three-pronged approach to school safety is suggested that includes: (1) implementation of a behavior-based identification of high risk youth and organization of youth services; (2) creation and maintenance of an organizational atmosphere that undermines acceptance of violence in the schools; and (3) implementation of strategies to prevent violence among the portion of the school population that is not at high risk. (Contains 25 references.) (SLD)

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School Strategies for Increasing Safety
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Patrick H. Tolan

Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY

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SCHOOL STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING SAFETY

The recent incidents of horrible violence at presumably safe schools in protected communities has caused great concern and disillusionment as teachers, parents, and students face the fact that even these schools are vulnerable to violent acts. Numerous reports show schools organizing to manage such a potential crisis. But are public schools really dangerous places? Should school officials be organizing crisis intervention plans to manage a possible school shooting?

Response to the potential for violence is needed, but the strategies needed are not the ones that may come to mind first if a Columbine or Jonesboro incident is used as an example of a crisis to be prevented. Those incidents are very rare and not directive about the violence that may erupt in and around schools. Also, the type of threat and responses needed are not uniform across communities; inner-city schools, for example, face a different level and type of risk. Finally, it is important to distinguish efforts to maintain an overall school atmosphere that does not tolerate violence from efforts to address particular dangers. An effective school safety plan should combine calm and sound attention to the violence that currently pervades children's lives, organization of schools to reject violence and attitudes supporting violence, and collaboration with other agencies and resources to manage high-risk children. This brief presents an overview of such a comprehensive school safety plan.

Are Schools Dangerous?

The Facts

The answer to this question depends on the definition of school safety and, to some extent, on where the school is situated. With regard to the absolute probability of encountering violence or being victimized by crime, most schools in most communities are remarkably safe. Schools are the social setting in which children are most protected and least likely to be harmed (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). Only 7 percent of serious assaults and 4 percent of robberies occur at school. Children and adolescents are one-third as likely to encounter weapons at school as elsewhere. However, within this overall picture of relative safety, there are increasing rates of weapon possession among students and increasing reports of assaults to students and teachers (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995).

The surety of safety at school varies by community. Schools in communities with greater gang activity and other forms of youth violence are more likely to experience on-site violence and other crime (Elliott et al., 1998). Yet, it is almost always safer to be in even these schools than elsewhere.

If the definition of school safety is expanded to encompass traveling to and from school, and time spent with friends and acquaintances after school, the insulation from harm is lessened considerably, because the most likely time for victimization is before and after school (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Still, most violent threats are limited to minor incidents in most communities. In inner-city communities, however, the after-school threat of serious harm can be quite ominous. In communities with active gangs, particularly those with violent disputes, children traveling to school may be caught in the cross-fire. Also, youth of "recruitment age" may face repeated threats and beatings intended to intimidate them or encourage allegiance to a gang (Anderson, 1990).

The Perception

If the definition of safety includes the subjective feeling of being safe, then it is accurate to say that most schools are becoming less safe. For example, in a national poll, almost half of the children thought their school was becoming more violent, with almost 10 percent afraid of being shot by a classmate (Children's Institute International, 1996). Another poll found that teachers are even more fearful, and that nearly half of law enforcement officials believe school violence has increased (Harris & Associates, 1993). More than is explainable or proportional to the crime levels at schools, teachers, parents, and students are perceiving schools as less safe and they are more preoccupied by potential harm.

The shift in perceptions of school safety and its implications for school management warrant careful consideration. Some of the fear is due to increased rates and lethality of youth violence, both of which have increased in the last decade (Maguire & Pastore, 1996; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). The unprecedented youth access to handguns has changed the nature of the problem and also exacerbated fear. What would have been a fist fight in the past is now a homicide. In addition, extensive media coverage of recent dramatic school shootings fosters a sense of imminent and unpredictable danger in otherwise seemingly safe communities.

Another likely cause of fear is the pervasiveness of exposure to violence through movies, television, electronic games, or direct witnessing of violence (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Violence is a part of almost everyone's daily life in the U.S. Children are likely to witness many presentations of serious acts of violence over the course of a month and to have familiarity with violence and violent acts that are virtually unheard of in other countries. These multiple "exposures" produce the perception of violence as neither predictable nor escapable (Elliott et al., 1998).

Interventions for High-Risk Youth

Most schools have a small percentage of students who exhib-

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it aggression frequently and at a serious level. These high-risk students are in need of identification and early intervention because they are likely to evince violence, though not likely to engage in the dramatic violence that has been prominent in the news recently (Snyder, 1998; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998). They are, however, likely to have difficulty with school achievement and behavior, to have conflicts with other students, and to be responsible for much of the fighting, bullying, and other violence in or around schools (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). They are also apt to make significant demands on school resources over the course of time and to compromise school safety.

Early Identification

The most consistent finding about crime and violence is that about 6 percent of the population commits about 50 percent of the crime and 70 percent of the violent crime (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Thus, in any school, a small percentage of students will be responsible for much of the aggressive and violent incidents. While identification of students who will become violent is almost impossible, it is possible to identify who is at risk (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Most youth exhibiting risk factors are not violent; however, they are likely to have behavioral problems in school and the community, low academic achievement, and/or health and other social problems. They will respond to interventions whether they evince violence or only other problems that affect their schools.

Identifying these youth is best undertaken early in the elementary years, with second through fifth grades as the optimal time, because later intervention may be less effective or require more intensive and extensive efforts (Henggeler et al., 1993; Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995). Earlier identification may be hindered by difficulty in differentiating problems of adjustment to school from those that are more persistent.

The best predictor of violence and of further criminal behavior is the age when such behavior is first exhibited, such as the age of first incident at school or of a more serious indicator, such as arrest (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998). In addition, persistence across time and different settings of aggression, oppositional behavior, and problems with self-control are important predictors. The child who has difficulties at home and school or in various classrooms is at high risk. Risk is also predicted by poor parenting, especially poor monitoring or low involvement with the child, and inconsistent and harsh/abusive discipline practices (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), and by problems with peer acceptance (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Also, children who are rejected by other children usually have higher levels of aggression and more frequent peer conflicts. Although lower academic capability and performance predict risk, misbehavior is the factor most related to risk for aggression and associated problems (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Children with learning disabilities or low intelligence can be at risk, but the risk is related to the accompanying presence of behavior problems. Thus, screening children with more than a single behavioral incident to evaluate parents' practices and involvement, and to determine peer rejection and conflicts, should identify their likelihood of being seriously aggressive and violent.

Violence Prevention Strategies

For high-risk children, interventions require extension of the school's involvement beyond the traditional boundaries: engaging the child and family members in strategies that promote effective parenting and family organization, emotional cohesion or closeness, and communication (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). However, many of these children and their families have multiple problems and are isolated or alienated from the social networks of neighbors and family that ground most families. They are also more likely to be involved with child welfare, juvenile justice, the adult legal system, and mental health and drug treatment programs (Tolan, 1999). Most, although in need of multiple-component interventions, will not have been identified prior to the school's identification of the child. Frequently, the school will act as the initiator of intervention which may require coordinating access and use of multiple participants in a service network (Henggeler, Melton, & Smith, 1992). Such collaboration may be a new approach for some service systems and reveal competing and conflicting mandates and expectations.

The organizational role of the school may be limited to identification and referral to a family intervention provider, or it may involve convening a network of service providers and facilitating coordination. But in most cases, the school has a key role in developing within-school behavior management approaches promoted by the other service providers involved in the intervention system (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1992). For example, it is important to connect behavior management strategies used in the classroom with those used at home, promoting collaboration between parents and teachers in managing high-risk children.

Schoolwide Safety Measures

In addition to organizing community support and managing high-risk students, schools should address the more general social organization contributions to risk. Two important strategies to focus on are these: 1) undermining tolerance of aggression; and 2) preventing aggressive and violent incidents.

Establishing an Atmosphere of Safety

To determine the overall level of aggression and likelihood of violence, schools need to assess whether they contribute to the tolerance, acceptance, or support of violence and aggression. Establishing and maintaining an environment that does not tolerate violence is not reducible to "zero tolerance" policies (which mandate strong sanctions against any violence or "violent-like" act), particularly those that are meant to replace the judgment of individuals responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school. Simplistic zero tolerance policies that may nonsensically equate minor incidents with serious offenses do not promote a sense of safety. Rather, by promoting a perception that those in charge of school safety are abdicating attention to and judgment about specific incidents, these approaches increase the sense of threat and misdirect and alienate the interests of the community.

In contrast, it is important that schools inculcate values that render them safe and predictable environments where use of aggression is not acceptable and leads to consequences. It is important to recognize that if the school administration and staff believe that violence is not eradicable, their resignation will undermine the efforts of others. Schools must provide opportunities for support and foster development of acceptable, appropriate behavior, including restitution. They must promote responsibility, including family responsibility, for students' use of aggression.

Responding with appropriate severity to violent incidents and implementing policies that subvert a culture of violence are essential to developing and maintaining positive attitudes and behavior of staff and students. Serious incidents merit extensive attention, a clear response, and, when necessary, graduated sanctions. If administrators do not know what to do or how to respond wisely, students and many staff and families will infer that their safety is at risk. Further, it is not sufficient just to manage aggression and deter violence in student-to-student interactions;

teacher-to-student and staff-to-staff interactions require similar oversight. Tolerance of violence is not only demonstrated by the occurrence of violent incidents among children, but also by teachers' and administrators' use of fear and coercion to control students. For example, a recent study showed that managing aggressive children depends on *both* the classmates' and the teacher's acceptance of the use of aggression; children changed their aggression level substantially over the course of their development as a result of changes in the level of acceptance of aggression within the classroom (Henry et al., 2000).

Thus, schools must review their policies and practices in behavior and relationship management to ensure use of respectful language, clearly stated rules, and a demonstration of dispute resolution. Many schools have found peer mediation or conflict management programs useful in providing methods for settling student-to-student conflicts, as well as staff-to-staff and parent-to-staff conflicts.

Another critical means of undermining an atmosphere of fear and violence is increasing inclusion of parents in school and in monitoring children before and after school. Surveys indicate a lack of parental involvement and supervision of children as the major reason for increased violence. Engagement of parents in schools decreases aggression of students.

Preventing Violent Incidents

Although high-risk youth are responsible for a substantial portion of violent incidents, many of these incidents involve students who are not at high risk. There is need for intervention efforts to prevent the eruption of violent incidents by lower-risk students. Also, serious violence is rare in most schools; the most common type of violence is a fist fight or other "pushing and shoving." Therefore, policy and practice should *not* be based on avoiding those rare events. Schools should undermine tolerance of aggressive behavior through sanctioned methods of resolving conflicts and social-cognitive training. Adult supervision of before- and after-school time is one of the most effective methods of preventing the escalation of minor conflicts.

A small group of approaches has been evaluated and shown to be ineffective. Among these are school uniforms and metal detectors. In addition, small-group programs and insight-oriented/psychodynamic psychotherapy for high-risk youth have been related to increased risk (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Tolan & Guerra, 1994). However, most approaches have not yet been adequately evaluated (Elliott & Tolan, 1998). Also, some effective strategies are beyond school control, such as reducing children's exposure to media violence. Indirect efforts, such as "turning off the television" or educating parents about limiting exposure to media violence, have not yet been adequately evaluated.

Special Strategies for Inner-City Schools

Schools serving some inner-city communities face a more substantial and serious threat of violence. Such communities are distinguished from other urban poor communities by elevated rates of violence, high mobility of residents, concentrated poverty, and higher rates of multiple social problems (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Wilson, 1989). These characteristics present an added, and different, type of risk for violence to children and their families, and, further, schools may have less opportunity to resolve or dissipate social conflicts that originate in the community. In contrast, the risk of violence can be reduced in more stable poor urban communities with greater involvement of their residents and neighborhood organizations that support families and help monitor youth (Elliott et al., 1986; Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Another differentiating factor for inner-city schools is the limit in resources that promote a sense of safety and security (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997). There is likely to be greater turnover of staff, more difficulty securing the building, and a lower quality of physical plant and educational materials than elsewhere (Elliott et al., 1998). These features may make it harder to promote a positive educational atmosphere and establish the school as a site of safety and nonviolence.

In inner-city communities, the belief that aggression is a viable or necessary response to frustration may be prevalent. Fighting and violence may be viewed as a way of attaining status, maintaining security and safety, and ensuring opportunities (Anderson, 1990). This behavior may be seen as part of the social regulation of groups within the community. In addition, violence may be evident in the behavior of police and teachers, occurring in the form of disrespect and racism towards and by youth. Thus, preventing school violence in inner-city communities may require a greater emphasis on school and community norms about violence, increased community safety standards, engagement of community members in the management of youth, opportunities for positive involvement of youth in the community, and enlargement of the geographic regions free of the threat of gang violence (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997).

Implementation Factors

It is critical for schools to apply strategies that can be effective. However, potentially effective interventions can only work if they are implemented with adequate resources, careful supervision, and strong support by the administration. Among the implementation features that are critical are: 1) well-structured programs for high-risk youth; 2) faithfully implemented and followed program approaches and policy practices; 3) readily accessible and usable support for staff and service providers; and 4) manageable caseloads for staff working with high-risk youth.

Effective violence prevention also requires the consensus of school staff to ensure organizational support for the effort and acceptance of responsibilities. As with most school organizational changes, teachers will bear the most responsibility for implementation of day-to-day strategies. Therefore, teacher involvement in strategy development and monitoring is critical. Similarly, full dissemination of intended strategies and inclusion of students, parents, and community partners is important.

Summary and Conclusions

While schools in most communities are remarkably safe, the elevated levels and lethality of violence in U.S. society have breached the boundaries of schools and begun to affect students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Further, in some inner-city neighborhoods, this increased threat to children and youth carries over to school and the time and space adjacent to schooling (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997). Thus, despite the small overall threat of serious violence, the fear of violence is increasingly influencing educational planning, and schools are acting to prevent any violent incidents.

Based on available scientific evidence, a three-pronged approach to school safety is suggested. The first prong is implementation of a behavior-based identification of high-risk youth and organization of in-school and community-based services for such youth that include a family-focused intervention.

The second prong is creation and maintenance of an organizational atmosphere or set of norms that undermines acceptance of aggression or violence in school by reflecting a general commitment to nonaggressive problem-solving and behavior management. Monitoring students during and after school is also nec-

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essary for a nonviolent school climate. Another important component of this strategy is employment of graduated sanctions rather than a monolithic judgment of any transgression.

The third prong is implementation of strategies to prevent violence among the portion of the student population not at high risk. There are a variety of effective approaches, but the most evidence points to problem-solving programming and adult supervision/involvement approaches. The effectiveness of such approaches will depend on careful, structured, extensive, and supported implementation over time; and on adequate resources, administration resolve, and support for staff. These strategies—in contrast with other efforts such as metal detectors, removal of at-risk students, and zero tolerance—can make a real impact on the actual safety, and perceived threat to safety, of a school's students and staff.

—**Patrick H. Tolan**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychiatry, Institute for Juvenile Research

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Choices in Preventing Youth Violence, Erwin Flaxman, Director, Teachers College, Box 228, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, 212/678-3158.

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